Rather than recounting the history of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union in this introduction, we place our volume in the historiographical context. Why should we deal with the history of Polish Jews in Soviet exile today? More than 75 years after the end of World War II, we are now in a situation where understanding the Holocaust is less a matter of dealing with huge blank spots in research than making sense of libraries full of scholarly knowledge. A growing interest in a spatial turn of Holocaust Studies or a “remapping of the Holocaust”—as Atina Grossmann has put it—has given rise to new research perspectives. The history of the Holocaust but more specifically the experience of those who escaped it outside Nazi-occupied Europe has received more attention on a global level. Holocaust refugee routes connecting Europe with every continent on earth opened up a new path to writing a global history of Jewish but also non-Jewish wartime experience.

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This collection is hardly the first volume delving into the history and memory of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union during and after World War II. It was inspired by the groundbreaking volume *Jews in Eastern Poland and the USSR, 1939–46* published in 1991. Edited by Antony Polonsky and Norman Davies, the volume originated in the Cold War with many archives still closed and oral history collections only then emerging as an important source. Thirty years after it was published, we invited scholars of various disciplines—historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and linguists—to share their research on the topic. Indeed, in recent years scholars have been paying increasingly close attention to the fate of Polish Jews in the USSR. Until recently, this was true mainly for the Hebrew and English-speaking academic world. In 2017, a group of scholars published *Shelter from the Holocaust. Rethinking Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union*—part original research, part reprints of past work; a visible sign that the subject of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union became a focus of research in a variety of perspectives. Katharina Friedla and Lidia Zessin-Jurek’s volume *Syberiada Żydów Polskich* (The Siberian odyssey of Polish Jews) was the first of its kind in Polish. Similar to *Shelter from the Holocaust*, it includes several chapters that were translations of previously published articles into Polish. All three volumes inspired the shape and content of this collection. With regard to the subject of this book, Markus Nesselrodt and Eliyana R. Adler have published comprehensive histories of the Polish Jewish exile in the Soviet Union. Katharina Friedla, Natalie Belsky, and others will follow with the results of their research in the near future. But the rather late interest of scholars of the

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4 Davies and Polonsky, Jews.
6 Edele, Fitzpatrick, and Grossmann, Shelter.
7 Friedla and Zessin-Jurek, Syberiada.
9 Katharina Friedla, Natalie Belsky, Na’ama Seri-Levi, Serafima Velkovich, and Lidia Zessin-Jurek are currently working on monographs closely related to the subject of this book.
Holocaust and East European Jewish history in the topic raises two questions: Why has this story remained in the shadows of public and scholarly interest for so long and is it fair to say that this field of study is now reaching maturity?

“On the Margins of the Holocaust”

There are four explanations for the delay in scholarly interest and publications examining the fate of Polish Jews in the USSR. Beyond political context, they all point to the global character of this particular scholarly endeavor. Both the primary sources and the early research on the topic are multilingual. In order to fully comprehend this story and access the relevant materials, scholars need to have fluency in Yiddish, Hebrew, Polish, Russian, German, and English. This is a difficult if not almost impossible task that calls for international and multilingual scholarly cooperation.

Moreover, the sources have been scattered across numerous countries. This was a result of Polish Jews migrating to various countries on virtually every continent after the war. Researchers therefore must either travel the world by themselves or again, cooperate internationally. So far, travel has been the preponderant approach but informal working groups have been established with centers in North America, Europe, and Israel. Scholars of Eastern Europe are all too familiar with the reality of closed archives and classified collections. Despite the opening of some archives in the territory of the former Soviet Union, many collections remain inaccessible to researchers, regardless of their language skills, funding opportunities, or level of international cooperation. At the same time, other archives have provided access to underexplored sources. We will return to the question of archival sources below.

There are two more reasons for the delayed historiographical and public attention: the effect of the Cold War on Holocaust memory and the establishment of Holocaust studies as a separate field in history. As Antony Polonsky notes in his foreword to this collection, it was very uncommon in the early post-war period to openly tell the story of survival in the Communist Soviet Union. While their goal of immigration to the United States led surviving Polish Jews to leave out their connections to the Soviets in their written records, immigrants to Palestine and later Israel equally faced a lack of public interest in their

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10 This is what Israeli Holocaust historian Yehuda Bauer called the story of Polish Jewish survival in Soviet exile. Bauer, foreword to From the Gestapo to the Gulags: One Jewish Life by Zev Katz (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2004), XIV.
Jewish returnees from Soviet exile were not alone in their survivor guilt or their strong will to look forward instead. Indeed, it was very common for Holocaust survivors in general to focus on establishing new lives in new environments before some of them began talking or writing about their wartime experiences. While this does not mean that there was no discourse—even if limited—on the Holocaust, it was only in the 1970s that public interest in listening to survivors grew significantly. An expanding body of Holocaust historiography, Holocaust museums, as well as works of art such as movies and books have created an environment in which survivors felt comfortable telling their stories.

The last reason has to do with the evolving field of Holocaust studies, its scope, methodological assumptions, and focus. When Jewish survivors began collecting documents and testimonies by fellow Jews in postwar Europe, many of them were not professional historians with the exception of Philip Friedman,

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12 Beth Cohen, Case Closed. Holocaust Survivors in Postwar America (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007). It must also be stressed that in the early years after the Shoah some memoirs and recollections on the Soviet experience written in Yiddish were published. Moreover, the Soviet exile appeared in a few Yizker-bikher memorial books though not in great detail. Especially in the 1940s and 1950s, above all in South America and Israel, some Yiddish publishing houses produced an important body of literature which has not been used in research so far. Zusman Segalowitsh, Gebrente Trit (Buenos Aires: Tsentr-Farbnd fun Poylishe Yidn in Argentine, 1947); David Lederman, Fun Yener Zayt Forhang (Buenos Aires: Tsentr-Farbnd fun Poylishe Yidn in Argentine, 1960); Jakov Kahan, Unter di Sovyetishe Himeln (Tel Aviv: Farlag J. L. Peretz, 1961); Gershon Lustgartn, In Vander un Gerangl (Tel Aviv, 1968); Yizchak Ichiels, Fun Bug biz Pyetshora (Tel Aviv: Yehiels, 1966). Markus Nesselrodt has shown the importance of early postwar Yiddish poetry. Markus Nesselrodt, “I bled like you, brother, although I was a thousand miles away’: postwar Yiddish sources on the experiences of Polish Jews in Soviet exile during World War II,” East European Jewish Affairs 46, no. 1 (2016): 47–67. For a similar approach towards literary sources: Magdalena Ruta, “Gulag poetów, doświadczenia uchodźstwa, łagrów i tułaczki na terenie ZSRR w twórczości polskich pisarzy języka jidysz (1939–1949),” in Zessin-Jurek and Friedla, Syberiada, 307–337; Magdalena Ruta, Without Jews? Yiddish Literature in the People’s Republic of Poland on the Holocaust, Poland, and Communism (Cracow: Jagiellonian University Press, 2018).
Nakhman Blumenthal, Joseph Kermisz, and a few others. Nevertheless, survivors, among them returnees from the Soviet Union, established several historical commissions whose archival collections are among the most valuable sources of information about the Holocaust and its aftermath. One center of an early reflection on Polish Jewish survival in the Soviet Union were the camps for Jewish Displaced Persons (DPs) in Allied occupied Germany. Since the late 1990s, growing research on postwar DP history highlighted the fact that most Polish Jewish DPs had spent the war in the depth of the Soviet Union. Preceding the research on Jewish DPs, the Holocaust had moved to the center of twentieth-century history writing in the United States and Western Europe. Yet, wartime and postwar history have very much remained separated issues in Holocaust historiography. At the same time, research on refugee experiences in the Soviet Union, Iran, Palestine, China or elsewhere has contributed to widening the definition of the Holocaust and Holocaust survival. We will return to this matter later.

According to a well-known anecdote, Raul Hilberg, one of the pioneers of Holocaust studies, was told by his adviser that he was ruining his career by writing what became his masterpiece, The Destruction of the European Jews, in the late 1950s. The history of the emergence of Holocaust studies was told elsewhere. What is important in this context is that it took several decades to

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16 Jockusch, Collect.

17 Some landmark studies were: Israel Gutman and Avital Saf, eds., She’erit Hapletah 1944–1948, Rehabilitation and Political Struggle (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1990); Zeev W. Mankowitz, Life between Memory and Hope: The Survivors of the Holocaust in Occupied Germany (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Avinoam J. Patt and Michael Berkowitz, eds., “We are here.” New Approaches to Jewish Displaced Persons in Postwar Germany (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), and Margarete Myers Feinstein, Holocaust Survivors in Postwar Germany, 1945–1957 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).


establish international cooperation among key players within the multilingual field of Holocaust studies. From the beginning of early Holocaust studies, discussion centered around methodological debates on how to incorporate them into a comprehensive approach to writing the history of the Shoah.

In 1997, historian Saul Friedländer introduced his concept of an integrated history of the Nazi genocide of European Jewry. His idea was to combine various sources and perspectives—in this case victims, perpetrators, and witnesses of the mass murder—into one narrative. When Friedländer published his magnum opus on Nazi Germany and the Jews, this was a much-needed synthesis. An integrated history was necessary in order to simultaneously explain the perpetrators’ motives and actions, give voice to the victims, and help understand the role of millions of Europeans who were in one way or another involved in the persecution and destruction of Jewish communities. It took four decades from the early groundbreaking works of Holocaust historiography to Friedländer’s book which made extensive use of Jewish ego documents. Raul Hilberg himself—whose research relied on German perpetrator sources—indicated the need for a new direction in Holocaust research in 1988:

Even if we keep searching for more documents in archives . . . or generate more testimony in oral history projects . . . the resulting picture will surely be more detailed, but it will not contain a sharply new perspective. And that is only half of the problem, because the question is not confined to what we should describe; it is also a matter of how we should write.

One important reason for the challenges in developing methodological approaches to the study of the Holocaust was its scale and complexity. This is why Friedländer’s work was necessary and may serve as a model for the history of Jewish flight and exile during World War II.

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21 See for example the biennial Lessons and Legacies of the Holocaust Conference (since 1989), and the two academic journals Yad Vashem Studies (since 1957) and Holocaust and Genocide Studies (since 1986).
While it may still take time for a fully integrated history of Jewish exile in the Soviet Union, the body of research in English has been growing considerably over the past 15 years, and we hope that scholars from other fields of expertise will contribute. It brought to our attention both old and new questions. Importantly, perceiving Polish Jewish returnees from the Soviet Union as survivors of the Holocaust is hardly new. As this volume suggests and the extensive body of Yiddish poetry, novels, short stories, and memoirs from the 1940s and 50s shows, many Polish Jews considered themselves part of a survivor collective long before such questions arose in legal terms or memory politics. Such a move may be necessary to add new perspectives on the subject of this volume, for example from Holocaust, migration, East European, war, Gulag and genocide studies. Getting to know the history of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union may lead to a better understanding of research topics that have not been associated with this story so far. One example may be the discussion of the term survivor in Holocaust studies; still being hotly debated both in academia and the public sphere. The survival of three-quarters of the small number of surviving Polish Jews is a history of forced Soviet refuge but at the same time part of a larger story of World War II and the Holocaust. In the official Polish and Soviet contemporary documentation as well as in the historiography this group is categorized mostly as refugees, sometimes also as deportees, evacuees, or as flight survivors. Many of those who survived in the East were refugees from Central and Western Poland. Some of them found themselves in the USSR as POWs, political prisoners, deportees, voluntary workers, or evacuees after the German invasion of the Soviet Union. Therefore this is a complex and complicated history of survival marked by very different experiences. This is why it is so difficult to apply a single integrating term for all Polish Jews who survived the war in the unoccupied Soviet Union. While the majority survived due to their arrival on Soviet soil, others fell victim to the Soviet security police, died in battle against the German army or starved to death. There is no unifying Soviet experience, but a variety of it.

25 Adler, Survival on the Margins, 5.
Another example of the need for a cross-disciplinary conversation is the fascinating interaction between Polish Jewish refugees, Soviet evacuees, and the local populations in the Soviet Union. Here Soviet and Jewish studies could mutually benefit from each other’s insights. The classic disciplinary crossing between migration and Jewish studies may also broaden their perspectives by studying the border transgressing movement of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union and beyond.

**New Research Perspectives**

There is a growing need for interdisciplinary mining of the rich body of sources. The political transformation which began in Poland in 1990 and continued with the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in opening previously sealed archives. They revealed a plethora of information critical to the understanding of the wartime and postwar era. More importantly, the growing public awareness of the history of the Holocaust spurred Jewish survivors, especially in the United States, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, to share their experiences and memories of life in the Soviet Union from 1939 to 1946. Both survivors and their children discovered the Soviet chapter in their family history which resulted in several publications and exhibitions. Moreover, several research institutions including the Yad Vashem Archive in Jerusalem, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation, and Ośrodek KARTA Eastern Archive in Warsaw began to show interest in the topic, collecting and publishing numerous inter-

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views with Polish Jewish survivors of Soviet exile. These projects resulted in collecting a broad spectrum of recorded testimonies accessible for researchers. Yad Vashem and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum collected thousands of video testimonies. Both archives also offer large visual documentation which can also be used for research purposes. The largest archive worldwide which collected more than 50,000 video testimonies is the Shoah Foundation’s Visual History Archive. We can also access testimony collections in Ośrodek KARTA, the Jewish Historical Institute and the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, also in Warsaw. This exceptional body of testimonies allows selective insights into the past while documenting emotions and reactions people were preoccupied with at the time. They have extraordinary informational value, especially because of the fragments which draw a broad picture of postwar life: the repatriation from the Soviet Union to Poland, confrontation with the catastrophe of the Holocaust, visions of restoring postwar Jewish life in Poland, as well as escape to the Displaced Persons camps in Germany and further emigration.

The access to new archival collections in post-communist Europe as well as developments in digital humanities have led scholars to raise new questions concerning social and everyday life of Polish Jewish refugees in the USSR, interethnic relations in the Soviet hinterland, or issues related to identity and collective memory.

Despite the increasing growth of scholarly work, the subject of the Polish Jewish experience in the Soviet Union still leaves many issues to be explored by researchers. Some of these topics remain politically controversial. Among these is the attitude of the Polish government-in-exile towards Jews in the USSR and in particular the so-called amnesty\(^29\) announced for Polish citizens after the Polish-Soviet agreement of August 1941.\(^30\) The amnesty has been presented as a turning point in the Polish Jewish relations in exile, and a catalyst for rejection of Polish Jews who sought to be drafted into the Polish army,

\(^{29}\) The word amnesty was used in the above-mentioned Polish-Soviet agreement. Yet, the Polish government-in-exile stressed that Polish citizens on Soviet territory were held captive for no legitimate reason which is why most historians reject the term. From the Soviet standpoint the imprisonment of those who were held in special settlements and other forced labor camps was legal.

resulting from privileging ethnic Poles. At stake was a place in the army and protection from the government in London, since many Polish Jews had lost their Polish citizenship during the war. Therefore, very important issues for further research could be the activity of the Polish embassy delegations and their attitudes toward Polish-Jewish citizens and the question of Jewish soldiers in Anders’ Army, especially the fate of those who took part in the battle on the Western front.31

It would also be worth looking at the aid operations and international reactions of Jewish organizations, among others in the Yishuv, towards Jewish refugees in the Soviet Union.32 Still much is left to be written about the daily life of Polish Jews in Soviet exile, and the relations between Jewish and non-Jewish Polish deportees. Likewise, additional issues such as gender and the consequences of political affiliation should be integrated in the research. Another potential subject for future research may concern the attitude of the Union of Polish Patriots (Związek Patriotów Polskich) toward Jews in the USSR, the activities of the Steering Committee of Polish Jews in the USSR (Komitet Organizacyjny Żydów Polskich), but also the question of Jewish support for the Soviet regime. The myth of “żydokomuna” (Judeo-Communism)33 was reactivated intensely during the Soviet occupation of Eastern Poland (1939–1941) and culminated after the war, when Jews appeared in political positions where they have never been seen before. This perspective is the object of unending debates that has bred its own literature on the subject.34 As a matter of fact,

31 The first attempt to explore the question of Jewish soldiers within the Anders’ Army was the investigation by Yisrael Gutman, “Jews in General Anders’ Army in the Soviet Union,” Yad Vashem Studies XII (1977): 231–296. See also Tomasz Gąsowski, Pod sztandarami orła białego. Kwestia żydowska w Polskich Siłach Zbrojnych w czasie II wojny światowej (Cracow: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2002). Interestingly, Norman Davies does not explore the subject in depth in Trail of Hope. The Anders Army. An Odyssey Across Three Continents (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).


33 The political antisemitic stereotype of “żydokomuna” or “Judeo-Bolshevism” came from the prewar period, when the image of Jews as profiteers, rulers and servants of the Soviet Union was wide used.

34 See, for example, Krzysztof Jasiewicz, Rzeczywistość sowiecka 1939–1941 w świadectwach polskich Żydów (Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, RYTM, 2009).
also this chapter of the history of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union requires more extensive analysis.

The Polish Jewish experience of repatriation has raised increasing interest. What seems important in this context is the reflection on the impact of the Soviet experience on the reestablishment of Jewish life in postwar Poland and the question of networks and support among this group of Jews. What is still missing is research on those Polish Jews who stayed in the USSR until the second repatriation in the mid-1950s as well as on those who stayed permanently. There are no exact figures how many Polish Jews decided to stay in the Soviet Union after the war. There is one more issue that continues to bedevil historians working on this topic, namely the question about statistics. Given the enormous fluctuation of this group of refugees, historians will perhaps never be able to determine exact numbers of Polish Jews who fled to the Soviet occupied territories, who were deported into the interior of the USSR, who volunteered to work in the East, who were imprisoned, who went after the “amnesty” to Central Asia, lost their lives in the Soviet Union or survived the war and were “repatriated” to Poland. Recently, Mark Edele and Wanda Warlik published a comparative evaluation of the extensive sources which provide a good overview on these statistics.36

It is to be hoped that in the future historians will make more use of the extensive and rich archival collections in their historical examinations. The chapters in this volume indicate the enormous potential of unexplored sources and validate that this field of research still has the potential to be expanded.

Overview of the Book

Twelve chapters are divided into two chronologically arranged sections: history and memory. The first deals with events that took place between 1939 and 1959 with a focus on politics and culture; the second focuses on debates and reflections about the historical events during wartime specifically.

In his chapter, Markus Nesselrodt analyzes various ways of escaping to the East by comparing the first flight movement in the fall of 1939 with the second wave of escape into the Soviet hinterland after the German invasion of the USSR in 1941. Using several biographical sketches, Nesselrodt analyzes successful attempts by Polish Jews to escape. He describes individual decision-making

35 See e.g., Nesselrodt, Dem Holocaust entkommen, 270–323.
processes, shows complex circumstances under which the flight occurred, and reflects on the differences in the size and dimension of the flight movement.

Eliyana Adler sheds light on the experiences of Polish Jewish children and youth in the Soviet Union during World War II. The Soviet exile through the lens of children remains a relatively unexplored part of the historical narrative about Jewish fates in war-torn Soviet Union. Adler provides an in-depth analysis of twelve early children's testimonies from the collection of the so-called Palestinian Protocols. Children’s statements include an extraordinary wealth of information describing the German invasion of Poland, flight into the Soviet occupation zone, deportation to distant parts of the Soviet Union, and religious and ethnic relations between Catholic Poles and Jews. While exploring some methodological and analytical questions, Adler highlights the enormous potential for research in this valuable corpus of sources.

Albert Kaganovitch’s chapter provides an analysis of interviews, archival documents, and memoirs of Polish Jewish refugees addressing the complex subject of relations between Polish Jews and Catholic Poles in the Soviet exile. His contribution examines their contact zones on the individual and the official level, including Polish orphanages, and the representatives of the Polish government-in-exile.

In her chapter, Katharina Friedla presents new insights into a hitherto largely neglected topic—the experiences of Polish Jewish soldiers within the Polish Army in the USSR. She examines Polish Jewish soldiers’ motivation for fighting, Polish and Soviet recruitment policies towards Jews, as well as Polish-Jewish relations and the participation of Jewish women in the army ranks. Entering the prewar Eastern Polish territories in the summer of 1944, Polish Jewish soldiers were the first to come face-to-face with the unimaginable destruction of the Shoah. Friedla explores how it affected Jewish soldiers, how they confronted German soldiers and civilians, and finally focuses on their visions of rebuilding their existence after the war.

Wojciech Marciniak’s chapter recounts the repatriation of Polish and Polish Jewish citizens from the Soviet Union to postwar Poland. Marciniak offers an overview of Polish diplomatic activities which resulted in the organized return of Polish citizens, among them thousands of Polish Jews, in the immediate postwar period.

In her chapter, Serafima Velkovich shows that the repatriation of Polish citizens from the Soviet Union offered an opportunity for a group of Soviet Jews to escape Stalin’s regime. Based on ego documents as well as on Soviet secret police (NKVD) files, Velkovich reconstructs the escape methods supported by the Zionist organization Brichah of mostly Zionists and religious orthodox Jews.
Miriam Schulz focuses on Polish Yiddish intellectuals and their perception of Soviet Yiddish culture. She analyzes the role of Polish intellectuals who survived the war in the Soviet Union and adapted the concept of Marranos to the Soviet Yiddish literary scene, in particular for the murdered Soviet Yiddish elite, and transmitted this term to Western countries after the war.

The relation between the Soviet and Polish Yiddish writers is also the subject of a chapter by Gennady Estraikh. He analyzes the biography of Hersh Smolar—a communist functionary in the Polish People's Republic—and his activities from the late 1940s through the late 1960s. He examines Smolar's contacts with the Soviet Jewish elite, and shows how he succeeded in influencing Jewish life in the USSR.

The second part of the book focuses on the Polish Jewish memory of survival in the Soviet Union. Based on interviews, and testimonies, Natalie Belsky’s chapter sheds light on the interactions between Polish and Soviet Jews, simultaneously analyzing how the protagonists remember the past and the way in which they described one another. The testimonies reveal the importance of a shared Jewish identity of Soviet and Polish Jews.

John Goldlust discusses how Polish Jews remember and reflect on their Soviet experiences in accounts written decades after the events. While examining these testimonies and memoirs, Goldlust reflects on the problem of marginalizing and privatizing survival stories and sheds light on the tensions in self-perception of this group between “survivors” and “non-victims.”

Lidia Zessin-Jurek focuses on the Polish context of the so-called non-memory. She analyzes the remembrance politics of Siberia and the absence of the Jewish experience in broader Polish memory.

The last chapter of the volume by Renata Piątkowska and Przemysław Kaniecki describes various items in the collection of Warsaw’s POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. Through these objects, documents, and letters, Piątkowska and Kaniecki reconstruct a broad spectrum of Polish Jewish experiences in the Soviet Union and demonstrate the need for a visual history approach to the subject.

In his epilogue, Mark Edele summarizes the recent historiography and identifies future perspectives in researching the history and memory of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union.

Finally, a bibliography listing selected publications on this book’s subject in English, Polish, German, Hebrew, and Russian seeks to give an overview on available primary and secondary sources.